

# Government Scandal?

## Call a Mr. Clean

*Webster Seen to Be Member of Post-Watergate*

*'Honest People' Breed*

By E.J. Dionne Jr.  
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Washington has long been accustomed to hearing talk about "wise men," people brought into government because of their experience and judgment and who are presumed—usually because they are rich—to be free of avaricious designs.

But especially since Watergate, a new breed has come to town whose main task is to clean up scandal, to restore popular confidence in government agencies, to distance presidents from the failures and corruption of their appointees. Call them "Honest Men," or, if you prefer, "Honest People."

William H. Webster, who announced his resignation Wednesday as head of the Central Intelligence Agency, is a classic member of the breed. He took over the CIA after its reputation had been scarred by the Iran-contra scandal and, whatever else he did, Webster succeeded in the primary mission of Honest People: He got the agency's name out of the scandal pages and restored at least a modicum of public trust to the intelligence agencies.

"He has really been a stabilizer—a confidence stabilizer," said Harry McPherson, who served as a top lieutenant to Lyndon B. Johnson. That, McPherson added, was especially important for an agency where "everything is secret" and much of the public's knowledge is based on rumor.

The rise of the Honest People owes a great deal to popular skepticism about government bred by Watergate and the resulting tendency of prosecutors and journalists to look more carefully and energetically for corruption.

"We're better at exposing alleged corruption," said Suzanne Garment, whose book "Scandal: The Culture of Mistrust in American Politics," will be published this fall. "We're much more prone to call given actions corrupt than we used to be. We have more prosecutors and investigators than we used to have, and more journalists."

As a result, the demand for Honest People is rising exponentially. "The more scandals you produce, the more you're going to need these people," she said. "Are we going to develop an Honest Man Industry?"

Webster was just one in a long line of Honest People who have risen to prominence since Watergate. Indeed, Garment, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, noted that Gerald R. Ford helped pioneer the movement when he took over from Richard Nixon.

When the Environmental Protection Agency was engulfed by scandal in 1983, Ronald Reagan turned to William D. Ruckelshaus, a former head of EPA, to quiet things down. Reagan underscored Ruckelshaus's main role when he referred to him at his swearing-in as "Mr. Clean Bill Ruckelshaus."

Who are the Honest People? "It's not easy to define what characteristics these people have in common other than the way they're used," said John Morton Blum, a Yale historian. But generally, they tend to have safe, moderate politics—their job, after all, is to *quell* controversy—along with tidy incomes and enough government experience to know what they're doing but not so much that they'll have lots of axes to grind.

Evan Thomas, who co-authored "The Wise Men" with Walter Isaacson, said that Washington has highly ambivalent feelings about Honest People. "Washington can't relate to people who aren't leakers, gamesmen and backstabbers, who don't engage in the great game of trying to trump their sister agencies," said Thomas, who is Newsweek's Washington bureau chief. "On the other hand, we like people like that when there's a scandal to clean up."

Both Thomas and Garment argued that Honest People are often more important for their personal characters than for what they actually do for an agency. "They bring a sense of order and all that," Thomas said, "but rarely do they really clean up an agency."

"The biggest problem with The Honest Man," said Garment, "may be that with that quality of probity may come a certain unimaginativeness and an unwillingness to take risks." Webster himself faced just such criticisms.

She added that there are personal downsides to being one of the Honest People. They tend to be held to especially high standards and they tend to be discarded once the obsession with scandal fades. "Jimmy Carter performed that function for four years," she said, "and look what we did to him."

The Washington Post *A2*  
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Date 10 May 1991

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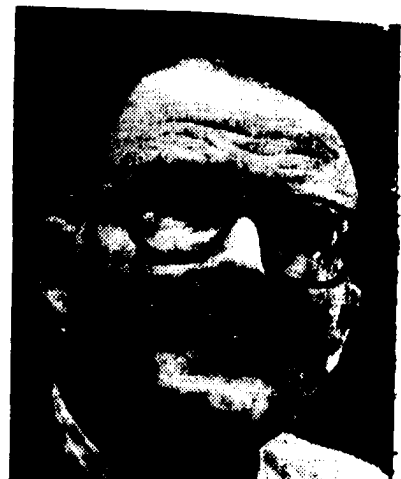
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**GERALD R. FORD**



**WILLIAM H. WEBSTER**



**WILLIAM D. RUCKELSHAUS**

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